



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**



Volume 10, No. 7

September 28, 2004

Historic Low Highway Fatality Rate in 2003; States' Progress Drops Drunk Driving Deaths To Lowest Level Since 1999

by Rae Tyson and Kathryn Henry, Office of Communications and Consumer Information

August, 10 2004. Washington, D.C. Secretary Mineta and NHTSA Administrator Dr. Jeff Runge announced that the fatality rate on the nation's highways in 2003 was the lowest since record keeping began 29 years ago. The number of crash-related injuries also dropped to a historic low in 2003.

"America's roads and highways are safer than ever," said Secretary Mineta. "The decreasing number of traffic fatalities and record low death rate on our roads shows that we are headed down the right road – one that leads to a safer America."

Secretary Mineta pointed to efforts by NHTSA that contributed to the reduction in the fatal accident rate, including campaigns to encourage safety belt use and discourage impaired driving, work with state legislatures to pass tougher safety belt and drunk driving laws, and rulemaking efforts to improve vehicle safety standards.

A total of 42,643 people died, and 2.89 million were injured in 2003. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) was 1.48 in 2003, down from 1.51 in 2002. It was



NHTSA Administrator Dr. Jeff Runge and Secretary Mineta answer reporters questions at the news conference August 10th announcing the 2003 fatality figures.

the first time the rate has dropped below 1.5. In 2002, 43,005 were killed and 2.93 million were injured.

"We at NHTSA are proud of the progress we've made and the success of the priorities we've established during this Administration," said Dr. Runge. "But much of the credit goes to the committed professionals in the states and communities who implement the

programs, and to safety professionals in the automotive industry who offer safer vehicles."

Alcohol-related fatalities also dropped significantly in 2003, the first such decline since 1999, as more states adopted laws that allowed them to prosecute drivers at .08 blood alcohol content (BAC) and above. 2004 marks

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the first year that .08 BAC laws have been enacted in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

"Tougher impaired driving laws, and the enforcement of those laws by tens of thousands of dedicated police officers across the country, are saving hundreds of lives nationwide, said Dr. Runge.

Moreover, NHTSA said that alcohol-related fatalities dropped in 12 of 13 states that participated in an intense, multi-faceted NHTSA-funded campaign to reduce their severe impaired driving problems.

A total of 17,013 alcohol-related fatalities were recorded in 2003, down by 511, or almost 3 percent, from the total of 17,524 recorded in 2002. The greatest reduction in fatalities was among those in crashes where the highest blood-alcohol content (BAC) was .08 and above.

Twelve of the 28 states that had decreases in alcohol-related fatalities were Strategic Evaluation States (SES), accounting for 75 percent of the total reduction in alcohol-related fatalities. The dozen states were Arizona, Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and West Virginia.

The SES states, supported by funding from NHTSA, have taken a leadership role in reducing impaired driving that includes sustained enforcement, periodic enforcement crackdowns, and paid media advertising funded by Congress.

The 2003 Alcohol-Related Fatalities announcement on August 25 came as more than 9,000 law enforcement agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico mobilized for the end of summer/Labor Day "*You Drink & Drive. You Lose.*" crackdown against drunk and drugged driving.

The crackdown consisted of 16 days and three consecutive weekends of high visibility enforcement with more than \$14 million in national and state advertising to stop impaired driving. (August 27 - September 12, 2004.)

"While we made progress in 2003, losing 17,000 people a year in alcohol-related crashes is unacceptable, said Dr. Runge. "For those who choose to drive impaired, the bottom line is, police are looking for you, and those caught will face severe consequences.

NHTSA annually collects crash statistics from 50 states and the District of Columbia to produce the annual report on traffic fatality trends. Summaries of the 2003 report are available on the NHTSA web site at: <http://www.nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/PPT/2003AARRelease.pdf> ■

Congratulations to the Following NHTSA Employees on Length of Service

Office of Injury Control	Years of Service
Brian M. McLaughlin	(25)
Office of Planning, Evaluation & Budget	
Marcia J. Talbert	(20)
Joseph E. Cameron	(35)
Rulemaking	
Donna Frazier	(25)
National Center for Statistics & Analysis	
Anita L. Fennell	(25)
Enforcement	
James L. Conner	(30)
Roland A. Slaughter	(30)
Richard P. Boyd	(35)
Barbara E. Cooke	(35)
Patricia A. Wallace	(40)
Office of Injury of Control Operations & Resources	
Sheila A. Gibson	(35)

Quote of the Month

"The reward of a thing well done is to have done it"

— Ralph Waldo Emerson
The Conduct of Life, 'Fate,' 1860
US essayist & poet (1803-1882)



Tennessee Passes Primary Belt Law

June 30, 2004. Nashville, Tennessee. In December 2003, Secretary Mineta addressed the National Conference of State Legislators in Washington, DC and called on the 29 states without primary safety belt laws to pass them. "Deaths on our roads are not statistics," he said.

"They are friends and neighbors, relatives and loved ones, taken before their time. Their loss is all the more tragic because so many of these deaths could have been prevented by using safety belts."

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Tennessee Passes Primary Belt Law *continued*

So began NHTSA Administrator Dr. Jeff Runge, in remarks in the Old Supreme Court Chambers of the State Capital in Nashville, on the occasion of the Tennessee's passing of a primary safety belt law. Rep. John Hood (D-Murfreesboro) and Sen. Michael Williams (R-Maynardville) led the effort to pass the measure, which took effect on July 1, 2004.

The change to Tennessee's law allows officers to directly cite a seat belt violation instead of having to first stop the vehicle for a separate offense. Similar laws in other states significantly raise safety belt use and reduce traffic crash fatalities and injuries.

In 1977, Tennessee was the first state to enact a child passenger safety law. ■

A Public Affairs Breakthrough: NHTSA Reaches Global Audience Through *Washington Post* Live Discussions

In a first for a Federal agency, NHTSA now conducts its own WashingtonPost.Com live discussions on a regular basis.

Originated and led by Ellen J. Martin, a public affairs specialist at NHTSA, the WashingtonPost.Com live discussions offer a rare opportunity for NHTSA to convey key messages to a large audience. They also underscore the expertise of its senior staff.

"Others might flinch at the idea of going live online with an international audience, but we see it as an extraordinary opportunity to extend our reach and communicate our mission," Martin says.

NHTSA's monthly appearances on the *Washington Post* web site have elicited myriad questions, as well as spirited give-and-take.

"Ironically, the key to a well-managed extemporaneous discussion is exquisitely good preparation," Martin observes.



New Car Assessment Group head Nathaniel Beuse answers questions during the first WashingtonPost.com live discussion. Rae Tyson, Media Director, Office of Communications and Consumer Information, oversees the Internet interaction.

Once a topic is selected, Martin assembles a team of experts who know the subject well. The team includes one "special guest" whose photo and biography are prominently featured on the *Washington Post*'s web site, along with the newspaper's print editions.

In advance of each month's discussion, Martin leads at least two team meetings to define the scope of the conversation and talk through the substance of answers to potential questions. She also writes an introduction to the topic that appears on a dedicated NHTSA web page on the *Washington Post*'s site.

Before and during a live conversation, Martin coordinates closely with Andrea Browne, NHTSA's moderator at the *Washington Post*, to ensure that the event is glitch-free. NHTSA's new web guru, Jim Schulte, also plays a key role in this effort.

The agency's WashingtonPost.Com live discussions emanate from a dedicated room at the Department of Transportation's headquarters. Once a conversation goes live, public affairs specialists assist program experts in carefully crafting responses to the questions that flow in.

"It's an electrifying experience to communicate in cyberspace. Still, we're always mindful that we speak as the voice of the federal government and that our discussions are forever archived as part of the public record," Martin says.

To date, NHTSA's WashingtonPost.com live discussions have featured Diane Wigle, who oversees the Safety Countermeasures Division, and Nathaniel Beuse, head of the New Car Assessment Group. Scheduled for upcoming discussions are Kathleen DeMeter, who leads the Office of Defects Investigation, and Marietta Bowen, a motorcycle safety expert for the agency. ■

Responsibility Has its Rewards!

July 13, 2004. Houston, Texas.

Minute Maid Park. Responsibility has its rewards. That's the message as Major League Baseball, the 30 clubs, and the TEAM Coalition joined forces to educate baseball fans about the importance of responsibility – always buckling up, and designating a sober driver.

TEAM Coalition is an alliance of professional sports, entertainment facilities, concessionaires, the beer industry, broadcasters, governmental traffic safety experts, and others working together to promote responsible drinking and positive fan behavior at sports and entertainment facilities. This league-wide promotion in support of existing designated driver programs by TEAM and its partners is designed to reward fans for responsible behavior. Each fan that pledges to be a designated driver at any Major League Baseball game can register for a drawing to be selected as that club's designated driver

for the season. The selected designated drivers for the two clubs who play in the 2004 World Series will each receive two tickets to their club's first home Series game.

"I commend Major League Baseball and all the clubs for taking a leadership role to promote the designated

driver program," said NHTSA Administrator Dr. Jeff Runge. NHTSA recognized all TEAM Coalition members for their efforts in promoting traffic safety messages through the *Click It or Ticket* campaign in May and now *Responsibility Has Its Rewards* launching with the MLB All-Star Game. ■



Pictured from left to right: Jeff Becker, President, Beer Institute; Jill Pepper, Executive Director, TEAM Coalition; Jeffrey Runge, M.D., Administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; Bob DuPuy, President, MLB; Michael Thompson, Senior Vice President, Aramark; Denise Singer, Director, ESPN ABC Sports.

Personal Tragedy Becomes Pageant Cause for Mrs. Virgin Islands

By Sam Haiman, Regional Program Manager, Eastern Region

In April 2004, on the island of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, 21-year-old Matthew Carter Miller was on his

way to have dinner at the home of his friend Judi Fricks when a car crash claimed his life. He was not wearing a safety belt. Matthew, an organ donor, helped seven people after his death.

Judi Fricks later won the title of Mrs. Virgin Islands and is now preparing to compete in the Mrs. United States pageant. She is working with the Virgin Islands Office of Highway Safety along with the Virgin Islands Minority Organ/Tissue Transplant Education Program to join in an effort to increase safety belt use, which is her pageant cause.

The initiative includes signs like the one pictured here at the exit of the St. Croix airport. ■



Pictured from left to right: Mrs. Virgin Islands Judi Fricks, Mathew Carter Miller's father Stan Miller, and VIOHS Director Barbara McIntosh unveil new buckle-up sign at St. Croix airport.

NHTSA Now is an official publication of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Office of Communications and Consumer Information.

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